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ABSTRACT

In 1985, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Childcare Services of Singapore started an experimental project designed to develop an alternative model of child care. The resulting project, the Community Childcare Center (CCC), differs from regular child care centers in that it: (1) is cheaper; (2) involves considerable community participation; and (3) serves both children in the child care center and other children in the community. The CCC is based on a tripartite model that involves the government, the NTUC, and the community. The government provides the capital needed to set up child care centers and subsidies. The NTUC provides the framework, structure, and professional expertise for operating the centers and coordinating the program. The community provides feedback, volunteers, and a network of support and resources. This paper discusses the history of institutionalized child care in Singapore, current child care services, challenges facing child care centers, responsibilities for child care, the alternative Community Childcare Model and the roles of its participants, and strategies for community involvement. (RH)

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AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF CHILDCARE: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NATIONAL TRADES UNION CONGRESS OF SINGAPORE

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Paper presented at
The International Conference on Childhood in the 21st Century
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Historical Overview

Institutionalized childcare began in Singapore in the late '40s as a welfare service for low income families to encourage mothers to work to supplement the husband's income. Stigmatised as a service for blue-collared workers, it was shunned by middle and professional class families for a long time. 1984, however, was the watershed, the turning point for childcare centres in Singapore. They began to take on a new meaning, a new vigour. The 70's rapid industrialisation programme had led to an influx of foreign workers, and, given the nature of policy then to phase out foreign workers by 1995, and given the full employment of males, the need to get women into the labour force became more urgent. In 1984, the Task Force on Female Participation in the Labour Force, brought together Government Ministries, employer organisations, unions and professionals to develop a comprehensive plan of action to encourage women to join and remain in the labour fource. The recommendations included:

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nationwide quality childcare, greater publicity to boost the poor image, systematic training for childcare staffand government assistance, financial and otherwise. (1)

Several local surveys had, by then, revealed that suitable childcare arrangements is a significant factor in determining whether women join, remain or re-enter the labour force (2,3,4)

Apart from the economic factor, a demographic change in Singapore gave the development of childcare centres an added push. In 1980, a decreasing trend in the fertility rate hitting an all-time low of 1.4 caused much alarm (5). This was attributed to more unmarried women, later marriages, later childbirth, smaller families of one child or even none whatsoever, particularly among the more higher-educated women. The 'Stop at Two' policy of 1972 became untenable and in 1987 changed to 'Have 3 or More, if you can afford it' Affordable and accessible childcare alternatives were seen as a strong incentive to encourage married women to simultaneously keep their career and have more children. Thus, the economic factor to get women into the labour force and the population factor to get women to have more children have contributed to what childcare is today.

<u>The Outcome: Childcare Today</u>

Within 5 years (1984-1989) childcare in Singapore has been

quite transformed. For almost 30 years until 1980, there were only 11 centres in the whole country. In 1984, there were 48 and today, there are some 180 centres or over 10,500 childcare places - an increase of 16-fold since 1980 or 3-fold since 1984. The Government had projected a need for 20,000 places by 1995 which is now suspected to be an underestimation. Apart from sheer numbers, staff training was also established where only ad hoc training existed. The NTUC with a 3-year funding by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, had from 1985 to 1988 developed a 5-level training strategy, a resource library, early childhood programmes and a training and demonstration Centre. It now conducts basic training for childcare staff in Singapore. The Institute of Education also offers the Basic course as well as the Intermediate and Advance Courses for childcare staff. The demand for training , however, far exceeds the courses available.

The establishment and implementation of the Childcare Centres Act of 1988, ensures that centres move beyond being merely custodial to developmental and educational. A more favourable publicity has also helped to change the image of childcare centres altogether. No longer stigimatised as a welfare service where subsidies are pegged according to income, childcare centres are now regarded as places where children have opportunities to socialise and develop in a stimulating environment. Now,

regardless of income, every child, up to the 3rd child in the family, is entitled to a government subsidy. The surveys on working women in 1983 (2) and 1986 (6) reflect the increasing preference for childcare centres. The latest survey by the Ministry of Community Development, currently under analyses, is expected to show a continuity in this trend. The waiting list estimated at 4,000 testify to the increasing popularity of childcare centres (7).

Challenges for Childcare Centres

There is little doubt that childcare centres are here to stay in Singapore. While this may help meet the economic and perhaps, to some extent, the population needs of the country, there may be some adverse repercussions on the well-being of children and families when childcare centres become the norm as working mothers increasingly join the labour force.The following issues need to be addressed:

- the social isolation of childcare children who spend a maximum of 12 hours a day, 5½ days a week in a childcare setting where they eat, nap, play and learn, with only their peers and female adults as their constant companions;

- quality time between parents and children since children will be spending more time in the centre with non-family members then with their parents. It is

is estimated that children can spend up to 68 hours a week in the centre and less then half that time with parents. Even then, much of the time is taken up by household chores, marketing, running errands etc;

- the need for both formal and informal support and resources for working mothers juggling with career, home and family. The trend towards nucleurisation of families means that the support from the extended family is no longer that readily accessible and available (8).

- availability, accessibility and affordability of childcare as demand outstrips supply and as childcare cost increases over time.

The question is no longer whether women should work. As in the case of the United States (9) Singapore women are working and will continue to work. The question is: when women work, what alternatives are there to ensure that children grow up in a normal environment, that relationships between parents and children as well between spouses are not sacrificed nor is it at the expense of the well being of these working women. What and where are the support, resources and facilities available and who should be responsible for them?

Who Should Be Responsible

When women work, it benefits not only themselves but it

Who Should Be Responsible

also improves the standard of living for the family; fulfills the needs of employers for workers in a tight labour market; strengthens the labour force and therefore, the national economy. A number of parties stand to gain, the spouse, the family, the employers, the government and indeed, collectively, the community. Each and all parties, therefore, should in some ways, be responsible for helping working parents juggle with career and home because collectively, they will have a bearing on both the economic and social fabric of society.

The Community Childcare - An Alternative Model

In 1985, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Childcare Services, the earliest and one of the biggest childcare organisations in Singapore, started an experimental project, funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, to develop on alternative model of childcare in anticipation of the issues raised earlier (10). The community childcare centre is different from regular childcare centres in the following ways:

- it is cheaper
- it involves considerable community participation, and,
- it not only serves children in the childcare centres but also others in the community.

The Community Childcare Centre is based on a tripartite model, involving the Government, the NTUC and the community.

The Role of the Tripartite

There are 2 major reasons for the Government to be involved in childcare. Both reasons relate to man-power - existing and potential - and both have a direct bearing on the economy of the nation. Firstly, Singapore has a severe shortage of local labour. Although the male/female ratio is 1:1, the ratio for working male/female is 8:1 The rate of female participation in the labour force is 47% in 1987 (11). If childcare alternative can encourage more of the remaining non-working women to join the labour force, then Government involvement will pay dividends.

The second reason is that a good childcare centre is not merely a place for young children to be cared for while parents work, but also a place to nurture young bodies and young minds. Although childcare centres arise out of an economic need of the nation, and in turn, the need of working parents, quality childcare centres have a great potential for the development of the nation's future resources.

The National Trades Union Congress serves the interest of workers, particularly all union members. According to the United States Fortune survey as reported by Love, et al, unreliable and unsatisfactory childcare arrangements affect the well being of workers and are predictive of high levels of stress and negative physiological symptoms (12). Affordable and accessable childcare is also found to be directly related to productivity (13). The NTUC

therefore, has a role to play in providing affordable and reliable childcare to working parents. Its effectiveness in looking after the interest of the workers will enhance its image and at the same time contribute to the economy by increasing both the productivity of workers and the manpower pool in Singapore.

Finally, the community should also be involved. For too long, the onus has been on childcare organisations to be fully responsible in the provision of the service. Since the childcare centres serve the children and families in the community, the community itself should be responsible in some ways. With responsibility also comes rights and a say in the quality of care. This empowers the community. The community here refers to parents, grassroot leaders, representatives from local social service agencies, schools, clubs and associations. For the sake of expediency of the project, the community refers to people who live or work within a political constituency.

Each member of the tripartite has a distinct role to play that complements one another:

- The Government provides the capital cost for the setting up of childcare centres and childcare subsidies.

- The NTUC childcare provides the framework, structure and professional expertise in operating the centres and in coordinating the programme.

- The Community provides feedback, volunteers and a network of support and resources.

Strategies for Community Involvement

Except for the occasional volunteers, involving the community in early childhood programmes is something new. Different strategies are adopted to advocate for community involvement, to recruit volunteers and to ensure continuity of involvement. There are basically 4 types of community involvement: involvement at the advisory level, centre level, parent involvement and involvement at the outreach level.

The Advisory Committee

A community childcare centre will only be established contingent on the support and involvement of the local Member of Parliament. With him as the Advisor, an Advisory Committee comprising leaders from the grassroots organisation, specifically from the Residents Committee, the Citizens Consultative Committee and Community Centre Management Committee is set up. The project team starts working with the Committee even before the centre is built. Other members are eventually recruited from the neighbourhood schools, local social service and child health agencies, Housing Authorities and voluntary associations like the Lions and Lioness Club, and finally, parent representatives.

The committee meets regularly to monitor the development of the centre, provide feedback on the needs of the community, discuss and help find solution to problems as well as to jointly organise projects for the benefit of the children and families in the community through its various network of resources and support. These activities include fund-raising, publicity of the centre and its programmes, locating and providing funding for parents who are unable to afford childcare fees and organising public education programmes. The project also collaborates with individual organisations on the committee in different areas. For instance, the toy and book library is in collaboration with the Lioness Club and the local library while the outreach story-telling programme is with specific Resident Committees and the Community Centre Management Committee.

The health programme is initiated with the local maternal and child health services which provides free check-ups for the children.

Volunteer Scheme in the Centre

The community can play an important role in preventing social isolation of childcare children who are in centres 12 hours a day, 5½ days a week. Exposure and contact of childcare children with community members and therefore, different role models tend to be limited. To bridge the centre and the community and at the same time to create an extended family environment, the Big Sister/Brother and

Grandparent Scheme are introduced. In the first instance, students from the neighbouring schools, volunteer regularly to play, tell stories, sing songs and in different ways play the role of an older sibling. Since many of the childcare children and volunteer students are the only-child in the family, being cared for by an 'older sibling' and having a 'younger sibling' to care for, respectively, enriches the experience of both. It also prepares the teenage volunteers for the practicalities of eventual parenthood.

With nucleurisation of families, children's contact with grandparents also tend to suffer. Ten years of **'Speak Mandarin, Not Dialects'** campaign coupled with the bilingual Mandarin/English programme in childcare centres and schools for Chinese children have, made it difficult for children to communicate with the grandparents who speak only Chinese dialects.

The grandparents scheme recruits senior citizens from Retirees Clubs and hopes to inculcate in children a healthy respect for their elderly and to imbibe some of the traditional values through the interaction between the 2 generations. The bringing of the student and senior citizen volunteers into the centres and the bringing of the childcare children out into the community, enrich the experience and social millieu of childcare children who might otherwise be isolated in their ivory towers.

Parent Involvemnt

For a long time and even to date, childcare centres in Singapore are regarded, both by parents and childcare staff, as places where parents pay to have the child well looked after when they are at work. There is very little linkage between the home and the centre. Several studies have pointed to the importance of involving parents in early childhood programmes for the continued positive effect of the intervention (13).

Our experience in NTUC Childcare prior to 1984 found that when parents were not involved, there were bitter complaints, considerable misunderstanding, mistrust and conflict between parents and staff. Morale was low and turnover high. From both research and experience, there are strong grounds to involve parents in childcare centres. We started a parent involvement programme in 1984 after a survey amongst parents indicated an interest in the idea. Though the structure of a parent-teacher group (PTG) parents and staff worked within the framework of 5 objectives that guide the activities of the PTG, viz:

a) to enhance communication and relationships between parents and staff;
b) to promote continuity and consistency in the care of young children at home and in the centre;
c) to enhance the centre through parent support;
d) to promote parenting skills and knowledge;
e) to encourage parent support amongst parents with common needs and interest.

To enhance communication and relationships between staff and parents, the PTG organised social activities, educational visits and recreational outings. To enhance the centre, the PTG raised funds to start toy and book libraries, made teaching aids for the centre and helped in repairs and maintenance work. To ensure continuity and consistency in the care of the children, and to further enhance their skills and knowledge in parenting, the PTG held sharing sessions among parents, between parents and staff, invited resource people to speak on different aspects of childcare and set up an information corner. In the process of all the above, parents develop a network of friendship and support among themselves and childcare staff. They acquire additional information on parenting and became more skilful in the use of quality time at home with their child. Parents became more understanding, supportive and realistic in their expectations of the staff and in turn, staff felt more appreciated and turnover drops. Parents who have been with the centre for some time became effective advocates for the centre.

Since parents work full-time, strategies for involvement is necessary. Parents meet when they pick up their children and on Saturday afternoon after work. Sub-committees are formed to involve more parents and to share the responsibility. Social occasions are sometimes held on Sundays - when parents bring the granparents as well. Parents and staff have 5-minute exchanges which add up to 2 hours a month.

A community childcare centre can be more than just a childcare centre. It should be a family centre as well for the well being of the child rests upon the well-being of the family. This can be done by involving parents in the centre to ensure continuity and consistency of care at home and in the centre; by providing parent education resources to enhance parenting effectiveness and quality time between parents and children, and, by providing an easily accessible network of mutual support amongst working parents. In other words, a childcare centre can be an information and referral centre, a parent education centre and an informal support centre.

The Outreach Programmes

The community childcare model goes beyond the realm of the childcare centre. Various outreach programmes maximise centre and community resources to reach children in the wider community.

The first programme is the void deck toy and book library. Once a week, toys and books are brought out of the centres to the void deck. For a token fee, a family can sign up to be members. The Library has two main objectives; first, it provides children of 12 and below, opportunities for socialisation and development through a variety of educational play material, play process and playmates. Secondly, the library provides a non-threatening environment for non-working mothers to learn how to support their children's development through

observation of children at play, discussions with project staff and other parents and through hands-on workshops that help parents acquire specific skills in making and using low cost toys with their children The library also disseminates information on health, parenting and pamphlets on topics of relevance to parents.

Since over 80% of Singapore's population live in flats, and have small families, the toy and book library helps to break the isolation of families. While children play, mothers socialise with other mothers.

Users found the 2 toy and book libraries helpful in the socialisation of the children, in providing intellectual stimulation and recreational (14). Common comments from parents include:

"He has learnt to share with other children... being the only child, he had difficulty doing so"

"I find the toys educational. I don't have any of them at home."

"My daughter is shy and sensitive. Thus, it's a good opportunity to mix with other children...easier when she starts school."

"I feel parents here mixes well.... provide me with some support."

Project staff observed that children were initially, inhibited, and clung to their mothers. Many did not know how to relate to the toys and to one another. Children from the centres were invited to join the other community children and in comparison were able to play with much imagination and acted as role models. After a few months, the same community children were able to play and share toys with other children, to queue-up for toys and played with greater creativity and imagination. They also became more skillful in entering on-going play situation with other children. Children of the 3 main ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese and Indian, were observed playing together and negotiating over toys while their parents looked on and chatted among themselves.

The library is coordinated by project staff and run by volunteers - students, members of the Lioness' Club and the parents themselves who help spontaneously in the setting up and packing up of the library.

The second community programme is the mobile story-telling outreach. Community volunteers from Youth Clubs and Residents' Committees are recruited and trained to dramatise stories, conduct children's games and songs and activities. The objective of this programme is to stimulate interest in reading amongst the young and to convey the importance of early reading and parent involvement with the children. Each programme lasts for about 1-1/2 to 2 hours and are held in community centres, basket-ball courts and other public places. These

outreach programmes often draw crowds ranging from 50 to as large as 200 children and parents.

Other outreach programmes

To promote the concept of community involvement to a wider audience, a mobile exbihition on "Community Involvement: Partners In Care" is set up at various public places - the library, the community centre, Government Ministries, Statutory Boards etc to inform and to persuade. The exhibits explain the concept of community involvement, identify the community involved and show in what ways various community groups are or can be involved in early childhood programmes.

Another form of outreach is through NURTURE, a bi-lingual quarterly publication that reaches out to parents and others who work with young children. NURTURE forcuses on current issues, provides parenting tips on child development, child management, health, safety and nutrition.

It also provides activities that parents and care-givers can undertake with their children. Information on children with special needs is incorporated in each issue as an attempt to increase public understanding and their acceptance into the mainstream. Each issue also highlights specific family services to increase awareness of available sources of support.

Conclusion:

There are now 2 community childcare centres - the Bukit Merah Community Childcare & Yishun Community Childcare with their various outreach programmes. The 3rd will be completed by the end of 1989. Meanwhile, groundwork has already started with the local Member of Parliament and the grassroot leaders. The nature of the community childcare model allows each centre to begin with the same framework but how each develops will depend on the committment and involvement of the different groups of community and the needs of the community itself. The project on Developing An Alternative Model comes to an end officially by December 1989. A second phase is proposed for model refinement and reinforcement as well as for dissemination. In fact, dissemination has already begun.

The big brother and big sister scheme and the grandparent scheme have been integrated into some of the regular NTUC childcare centres, while workshops on the toy and book library have been conducted for the various unions who wish to set up toy and book libraries for its union members. The project had also helped set-up toy and book libraries by grassroot organisations not involved in the project.

Sustaining community involvement and interest is not an easy task. As long as the community feels that its needs are being met, then continued support is very likely. The

NTUC advocates this model on community childcare because it believes in the role and responsibilities of the tripartite - the Government, the NTUC and the community. Through this model, it is possible to address the issues related to work and family. The community childcare centre model is able to alleviate social isolation of childcare children kept for long hours in childcare centres; help parents to achieve quality time with the children through the provision of parent education oppurtunities; provide a network of information, referrals and informal support for parents with common problems and common needs.

Through Government subsidies and community support, childcare can be affordable to those who need it.

When the community is involved, the childcare centre serves not only the children but the whole family. The model also responds to the needs of the community children by maximising the resources in the centre and the community network. I do not personally think that this is an easy model to implement but, it is a worthwhile model which requires the full committment of the Government, the NTUC and the community.

KKC/lyy

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